Yarning and yonga stew: Indigenous knowledge in tutoring research methods

Editor's Choice

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Abstract

Social work knowledge and practice are rooted in Western thinking, thus marginalising Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing. In this paper, we reflect on a mentoring and yarning relationship between an Aboriginal student and an Aboriginal mentor. The yarning relationship between the student and mentor facilitated the translation of Western research concepts into an Indigenous context, using the metaphor of preparing yonga (kangaroo) stew. We argue for culturally responsive pedagogies that emphasise the importance of dialogue in fostering a relational approach to learning. Yarning is proposed as a pedagogical method with broader applications in decolonising practices beyond the specific research learning context.

Keywords: *Social Work Education; Indigenous Knowledge; Yarning; Reflection; Research Training*

Social work education takes place in a university setting, where students are taught the knowledge, values, methods and contexts of social work practice. In Australia, a Bachelor of Social Work is a Level 7 qualification under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and a Master of Social Work (Qualifying) (MSWQ) is a Level 9 qualification (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013). In Bachelor's and Master's level qualifications, there is an expectation that research and research methods are taught as an aspect of the social work curriculum. Research poses political, cultural and epistemological questions over what counts as knowledge (Held, 2019), creating debate about the methods for investigating and developing social work knowledge and evidence. This paper draws on a reflective yarning process between an Aboriginal student and an Aboriginal mentor (Authors One and Two) about the content and pedagogy of a research methods unit in an MSWQ program, and how to approach the learning and assessment tasks taught by Author Four. The yarning process revealed some important insights into pedagogies that may help decolonise the didactic way research methods are presented and taught.

Social work is rightly criticised on the grounds that its knowledge and methods are artefacts of Western Enlightenment thinking, which disenfranchises and marginalises Indigenous epistemologies and cultural ways of knowing, doing and being (Rowe et al., 2015). Research is no exception. In Australia, there is a push to decolonise social work research, practice curriculum and pedagogy, so that it is more culturally inclusive and responsive to Aboriginal knowledge and practice (Green & Bennett, 2018; Rowe et al., 2015), with several courses attempting decolonisation through a "culturally responsive pedagogy" (Ryan & Ivelja, 2023, p. 307). The unit in question ("Research for Social Work Practice") explores the context, ethics, methodologies and methods that tend to comprise the bulk of social work research perspectives and techniques. Students complete a literature review, research proposal, and presentation assessments on a topic of their choosing. The unit is taught fully online.

While studying Research for Social Work Practice, Author One experienced some difficulties in how to translate and apply Western epistemologies and methodologies to an Indigenous context and framing. Author Two, an Aboriginal social worker with research experience, was employed to mentor Author One, to yarn about research, explore academic research concepts and jargon, and provide a supportive partnership to engage in the unit. We present aspects of their yarning relationship below, as a process of conceptualising the research process as metaphorical to the cultural tradition of preparing yonga (kangaroo) stew. Author One further discusses the benefits of this mentoring partnership, and subsequent insights from this yarning process are argued as important pedagogical ways of decolonising how research methods are taught in social work education.

Author One is a Whadjak Noongar woman, with connections to Ballardong, Yued, and Wadandi clans, who completed a Masters of Social Work (Qualifying) at the age of 64 years. Author Two is Minang Balladong, grew up on Balladong boodja (country) and now lives and works on Pindjarup and Wadandi boodja. The remaining authors identify as aspiring allies (Bennett, 2022).

Yarning Defined

Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010, p. 37) define yarning as "an Indigenous cultural conversation", which can take many forms. They explain that yarning can be social (concerned with introductions and building trust), collaborative (exploring ideas between two or more people on a specific topic, concern or project), research (concerned with and organising gathering information) or therapeutic (an affirming, empathic conversation on something deeply personal). Elsewhere, Lin et al., (2016) extend this to include clinical yarning, which is "a patient-centred approach that marries Aboriginal cultural communication preferences with biomedical understandings of health and disease" (p. 377).

In essence, yarning is a relational and dialogical practice concerned with learning, understanding and inquiry from Indigenous cultural standpoints (Byrne et al., 2021; Fredericks et al., 2011). Unlike some Western pedagogies, yarning is not didactic, in the sense that the yarning relationship is based on mutual and reciprocal exchange, building shared understanding through deep listening and storytelling (Fredericks et al., 2011). Yarning is a research method used in Aboriginal research practice and has been used to decolonise Western research concepts and processes into Aboriginal cultural knowledge (Dickson, 2020; Fredericks et al., 2011). Dickson (2020), for example, demonstrates the power of yarning as a method to navigate the intricacies of research ethics. In Dickson's example, yarning is a purposeful activity to decolonise the protocols and rules associated with research ethics governance and connect these with Indigenous cultural histories about respectful relationships. Byrne et al., (2021) argue for the power of yarning as an interview method for research or clinical purposes. Importantly, they contend that yarning is "part of a social inquiry [that] aims at raising to awareness Indigenous truths to an accepted and legitimized pattern of knowing" (Byrne et al., 2021, p. 1355). Fredericks et al., (2011) demonstrate the power of yarning as an action research method for health policy development.

The yarn presented below has social, research and collaborative purposes, as Authors One and Two build trust and knowledge of Western research concepts, and their articulation with Aboriginal cultural knowing. As demonstrated below, the yarn between Authors One and Two are the embodiment and expression of existing cultural knowledge and long-held traditions of yarning, passed down from their Elders, to create a safe and trusting space for learning.

Yarning and yonga stew

As Author Two did not live in the metropolitan area, the first step was to establish the tutoring relationship via Microsoft Teams. Acknowledging and understanding cultural respect was particularly important for building a relationship. Author Two started by asking Author One about her family and connections.

> *Introducing ourselves we always say where you from? what mob? and I asked what (surname) are you?* (Author One).

I explained my family and connections and joked about how my surname is Scottish and not connected to the Aboriginal families in our community with the same surname. My Noongar heritage is from my mother's family (Author Two).

She took me down to her connection of family and I've taken her down the (surname) path, down (town), not far from where she lives. So, she said. Well, you never know. And I said yes. When we talk like that, it's like you never know where that bloodline goes. So that connection. Just meeting her online, we connected, we're just down to earth yarning. So, I knew straight away that I was going to get this done and pass as soon as I connected with Author Two. Right from that moment I felt comfortable, and she was my motivation to move forward (Author One).

After yarning about family connections Author Two mentioned she was having yonga stew for dinner. Author Two talked about watching her grandfather cook yonga stew and how each time it was a bit different based on what he had in the pantry. Author One and Author Two talked about Author One's recipe for yonga stew. Talking about varying their ingredients depending what was on in the pantry or the fridge – *"No tomato paste. We'll put in tomato sauce instead"* (Author Two).

Authors One and Two discussed how yarning was so much easier; to talk out learnings and experiences rather than write about them. Author Two shared that blank pages were a nightmare for her as a student, but Author Four (former honours supervisor) would provide a template or recipe for Author Two and other students to follow. Author Two explained some alternative strategies for learning and Author One elected to talk through her readings and learnings from the lectures, and as she did this, Author Two would transcribe them under the headings of the recipe.

Author Two explained her way of working is a recipe.

So, this recipe is like when you're making a damper or making a stew, [but] you bring in the words, the skills and knowledge you need. So, that translation of community [and] individuals and putting it all in that recipe. She kept bringing back that recipe, where I understood what she was talking about, making a stew. [The recipe] put in that structure. It was her way. She wasn't using the jargon and she was using Noongar words for me to understand the language. Something shifted. (Author One).

A change in thinking and understanding around research jargon occurred through this supportive relationship, which shifted fear and apprehension at the tasks required for the research unit. As Author One stated, this process of demystification led to an increase in self-confidence and self-belief, which was reassured through the yarning dialogue with Author Two.

Author One selected her topic for the research project, and the outline of the proposal became the foundation of the recipe, which was broken into stages so that it wasn't overwhelming.

By way of analogy, the components of a yonga stew recipe were the outline and requirements for a research proposal, which has various sections (e.g., abstract, literature review, aims, methods, etc). Each of these were conceptualised as ingredients in a recipe, which, like yonga stew, can be creatively combined to produce the final result. Through yarning, Author One could visualise the components of a research proposal as analogous to a recipe, with each ingredient chosen and defined as necessary.

> She helped me by doing this culture way, [then] bring in that translation into the recipe. We know what they're doing out there in the community because we know our families. Then we bring it back into the academic way of the words, the language and the terminology. You've got to have that structure (Author One).

Author One likened their method to a form of translation between culture, and the non-Aboriginal/academic way. Author Two had successfully negotiated this divide between culture and academia, obtaining her honours degree in social work. Author Two had every confidence Author One could do the same. This belief and the level of trust that was established from the beginning allowed tutoring support to happen seamlessly each week.

> There were the challenges that come up, brought upon us, like the funerals and that grief and loss and my self-esteem was low sometimes. She was there to lift me up. When I said, I'm feeling a bit down and I don't know if I can do it this week, she said I think you can. That made a big difference, that I can face challenges when I have this positive person helping me and guiding me. I've got to balance it out. That relationship was so strong, we may not be related, but still that relationship was like a niece or sister to me (Author One).

Each week as Author One's confidence and understanding of research proposals grew, so did her research proposal. *"That was so deadly that I just picked it up straight away"* (Author One). Since graduating, Author One has encouraged others in the Aboriginal community to further education and training, explaining there is often a 'recipe' to follow but also emphasises the importance of her relationship with her mentor. When talking about her graduation, Author One reports that "her name is there beside me, she's walking beside me". Author One emphasised the power of education and why her qualification as a social worker is so important:

> Just look, I'm 64 this year. Don't worry about the age. Education is so important because you can inspire your children to do this. Being mentors for your children, your grannies, your nieces. I need to be someone out there for my family and for the community. Back in school we were put down the back. So, we're going to move forward now. We're educated. Now we can sit in the front row and voice out in a healthy and professional way (Author One).

Discussion and Conclusion

The Western focus of research epistemology needs problematising in social work education if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are to be included and not excluded. There are four key learnings we can distil from the above yarning experience. First, building a relationship in a personalised and trusting way creates the space for reflective teaching, and one that can engage in a critical examination of the structures of Western hegemony (Rozas, 2023). This includes the importance of connection through community and culture, and the legitimisation of Indigenous knowledge (Rozas, 2023). Second, the reflective dialogue attempted to bring the abstract nature of research content into an accessible form, in this case, by elaborating the metaphor of yonga stew. Third, approaching teaching from the point of view of culturally responsive pedagogy means the way of working we are writing about has multiple applications that can foster an approach to learning that is more inclusive and "transformative and relational in nature" (Ryan & Ivelja, 2023, p. 307). Finally, although this unit is delivered fully online, we argue for the role of dialogue and yarning as a pedagogy for small group teaching methods that supports decolonising practice (Christensen, 2022). This method is not about delivering content in a didactic manner, but about a constructivist learning approach to building understanding through small group teaching in ways that potentially address epistemic injustice. Yarning, then, could be embraced as pedagogical method that has decolonising purposes (Christensen, 2022).

For educators seeking to apply these points into their teaching, we conclude with some reflective questions that follow the four main points in our conclusion:

1. How does the curriculum actively work to privilege First Nations and Global South scholars and voices in research methodology, thus decentring Western epistemic hegemony?

2. How does the teaching of research methods draw on yarning as a way of creating diverse and culturally accessible understandings of different research methods and concepts?

3. How does the teaching embody a relational and critically informed pedagogy, aimed at transformative learning?

4. How does the pedagogy foster collegial connections, where students can work on authentic assessments in a mutually supportive social context?

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